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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: Minister of Commerce embraces reform

¶1. (U) Summary: Liberia's new Minister of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) is embracing reform on all fronts. The Ministry's lawyer is coordinating top-to-bottom review of all commercial legislation and moving ahead with plans to institute alternative dispute resolution for commercial cases. The GOL is looking towards WTO accession, is working to establish a standards agency, plans to strengthen the intellectual property protection function and is launching a website in January (<http://moci.gov.lr/>). They are interested in USG support for any of the initiatives. The Ambassador assured the Minister we will try to be helpful. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a December 4 introductory call by the Ambassador, Minister Miata Beysolow, accompanied by her key staff and Deputy Minister Frederick Norkeh, outlined ambitious plans to make the Ministry of Commerce a vibrant part of Liberia's economic revitalization. MOCI is expanding dialogue with the private sector and the Minister wants to empower Liberians to get more involved in commerce and help small businesses formalize by providing training, financing.

Commercial Law Reform

¶3. (U) MOCI is reviewing all aspects of commercial law, in coordination with the Liberia Better Business Forum (LBBF). They will revise consumer protection legislation, in coordination with Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture. They provided the Ambassador with a written request for USG funding for the Commercial Law Reform proposal (see below).

Alternative Dispute Resolution

¶4. (U) MOCI is also working quickly to establish an alternative dispute resolution (ADR) entity at the Ministry for commercial cases. The inability of the Liberian judicial system to deliver justice expeditiously, if at all, is one of the top obstacles to the business climate. An effective ADR system will require a legal foundation and training. They have approval from the Ministry of Justice, and are working with the courts to ensure decisions receive legal recognition.

Establishing a Standards Organization

¶5. (U) The standards lab is almost 75% complete, and UNIDO is providing standards training for lab workers (and has already sent five people to Nigeria for standards training). Once the lab is completed, the GOL will spin-off the MOCI standards section and the corresponding sections from Agriculture, Health and Public Works, into a National Standards body. There are also plans to move BIVAC (the pre-shipment inspection company, which is charged with ensuring the quality of imported goods) back to the Ministry of Commerce, from the Ministry of Finance.

How to Improve Management?

¶16. (SBU) Minister Beysolow has been told MOCI has 301 employees, but she feels that is unrealistically high and they will be cutting back and assessing capabilities. Approximately 50 staff members are located in the counties, but have almost no logistical support. There is one MOCI vehicle in the entire country, even though there are inspectorates nationwide and 48 (untrained) inspectors in Monrovia alone. Most county offices do not even have office space. They need to eventually computerize the entire ministry, and provide services like business registration on line. As one example, the office of price analysis does not have a computer, so depends on what traders report to determine world prices. As part of the reform, MOCI is moving ahead with a web site, which should be operational in January.

WTO Accession

¶17. (U) Liberia is many years from WTO accession, but has set that as a target. The Diagnostic Trade Integration Study has been completed, and the WTO focal point is working to educate other ministries on WTO requirements. MOCI is working on WTO papers on Industrial Policy and Trade Policy, along with many other steps to get the process moving, and welcomes any assistance. (Note: They are appreciative of the USDA-funded training for three officials in Senegal in September. End note.) The Ambassador noted the importance of regularly briefing legislators on WTO requirements, saying she hears repeatedly that they feel left out and appreciate being kept informed of the government's plans. The Minister agreed she had planned to meet with them and would make it a priority.

Can you help?

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¶18. (SBU) Minister Beysolow, noting their ambitious agenda, asked about possibilities for USG assistance. The Ambassador encouraged her to keep us informed of plans and projects. Before leaving, MOCI provided papers outlining the plans for the commercial law reform project (with a proposed \$2.56 million budget) and asked for further support with WTO accession. We noted USDA had expressed willingness to assist Liberia with the sanitary and phyto-sanitary, the technical barriers to trade, and the agricultural sections of the WTO.

¶19. (SBU) Bio info: Beysolow was in the United States before returning to Liberia earlier this year. In the United States, she worked at H&R Block, in a company that helped with small business development, and as a substitute teacher. She lived in Manassas, Fairfax and Haymarket Virginia.

¶10. (SBU) Before leaving Liberia in 1983, Beysolow worked with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the Ministry of Finance. The President's mother was Beysolow's first teacher (and her sister's Godmother). When Beysolow left Liberia in 1983, she settled in Abidjan, where she was able to receive Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and others fleeing the violence in Liberia.

¶11. (SBU) She and Johnson Sirleaf started a company together. She was recruited for this position over a long period, and dreaded returning to Liberia. However, Beysolow said she is delighted to be back and has no regrets because "There is so much that needs to be done." Her family is still in the United States. The MOCI staffers were clearly energized and enthusiastic to be working under the new regime.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD